

## **Dealing with Death**

Psalm 34:18, John 11:17-37

When I was about ten years old, the sister of one of my close friends was killed in a car accident. She was a wonderful young woman with a vibrant Christian faith who had just completed her first year of university and she had so much potential. Her sudden death was a real tragedy.

And it left her parents with an incredible sense of loss – I guess that might be stating the obvious, we know that mentally... but I experienced that sense of loss one night, maybe a year later when I was having a sleepover at my friends house and I happened to wake up in the middle of the night to go to the washroom.

As I walked down the hallway past their room I could hear them crying out to God with their sorrow and their questions... their grief still seemed as raw as it did a year ago at the funeral.

Friends- dealing with the loss that death can inflict on us is not an easy process, nor is it a quick one – and for many of you;

I'm stating the obvious again – because you've been through this or you're going through it right now.

However others of us – myself included- will have to walk down that path at some point in the future, and the thought of losing someone we love is so disconcerting and disturbing we try not to think about it.

But friends... the good news we need to hear this morning is that *“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”* (Psalm 38:18)

When the inevitable comes, and we have to deal with death and the loss that it leaves us... we are not left to deal with it on our own – The Lord is with us!

And friends that's not just a platitude, we know this is true because the scriptures reveal that God became one of us, to be with us, in Jesus Christ.

And the scripture we read this morning shows that Jesus was not only close to those who were brokenhearted and crushed in

spirit in the face of death – but that He himself experienced the sorrow and the sense of loss that comes from dealing with death.

Vs. 38 – Jesus wept!

The bible says that Jesus saw Mary and the mourners weeping and he was deeply moved and troubled in spirit. And when he goes to stand in front of Lazarus’s tomb – He weeps.

And the significance of Jesus weeping friends is that it validates our grief and the emotional expression of that grief when we are faced with loss.

I remember hearing a story about a woman whose husband had died and her community was impressed with how well she was holding up and dealing with the loss, but six months later her cat died, was hit by a car – and this woman absolutely lost it and went to pieces.

Friends, when the Lord is with us, as we are brokenhearted and crushed, it gives us permission- encouragement in fact to weep, to mourn, to express our grief outwardly, Jesus did.

In Matt 5:4 Jesus says “*blessed are those who mourn... for they will be comforted*”

You see grief is God’s healing gift to us – grief is a healing process which helps our spirit and our emotions, even our physical bodies – recover from the trauma and the loss we experience in the face of death.

But you can only receive the comfort – the blessedness that Jesus promises... if you mourn.

And friends it’s important to hear that, to be reminded of that because our society and lifestyles are not really conducive to mourning.

Often people who have lost a loved one reflect back on that time of loss and comment that they received a great deal of support around the funeral but once that time was past they

were expected in rather short order to get back to normal again and get on with life.

Maybe some of you have experienced that – even within a Christian community.

The truth is that we often don't really know what to say or do for people who are mourning, and this makes us feel uncomfortable, so we do and say nothing.

However, we can learn a few things from the scriptures about what we can do and say.

In John 11 we see that mourning was a communal activity. People had come from the surrounding area to comfort Mary and Martha upon Lazarus' death.

Rev. James R. Kok once wrote a little book about ministering to people called "Ninety percent of helping out is just showing up" If you are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing, then just show up and be around and don't worry too much about saying or doing much.

And it may feel awkward at first because we are so used to relating superficially with each other, and we're not accustomed to seeing others express pain and sorrow – but all you need to do is be there, and let them know you're willing to listen if they need to talk.

Friends your presence, especially as a Christian – is a tangible reminder for those who are grieving that the "*Lord is close to the brokenhearted*" because we are the body of Christ, we are His hands and His feet.

So sometimes we need to go to people and support them privately, but sometimes we need to encourage them and let them know that there is space and there is room among us for grieving publically.

Friends please hear and believe this! – **You don't have to have it all together to be a part of this Christian community at Valleyview.**

It's ok to come to church when you feel overwhelmed, when you feel depressed, when you feel sad.

Last fall Anne Eme got the call that her brother had passed away 20 minutes before church, but she knew that she didn't have to stay away from church because of her shock and grief. Instead she knew she could be here and cry out to God, and receive the support and love of her community.

So if you're grieving you don't need to worry about being a wet blanket or raining on anyone's parade by being here. There is space to grieve publically among us.

The only thing you need to do is be honest and let us know what's going on. Otherwise we might mistakenly think we've offended you or upset you.

And sharing how you are doing and what's going on helps us to pray and support you and walk with you.

And it's ok if being at church doesn't take away your sense of loss and make feel better – you are grieving, you are in mourning, and that takes time - “strength will rise as we **Wait** upon the Lord.”

Friends, its mourning itself which leads to comfort and healing, and mourning needs both times of privacy and times of community. Neglecting one or the other, or allowing others to do so will prevent us from fully healing and receiving the comfort which God wants to bless us with.

And we also see in this scripture passage how our human sinfulness can affect the grieving process as well.

In the statements of Mary and Martha and that of some of the Jews we have before us the two options to how we can react to the Lord who is close to us when we are brokenhearted.

Mary and Martha give us the faith option. Both go out to meet Jesus when he comes to them, and they do so in faith – but that doesn't mean they back away from the hard truth – that if Jesus had come sooner their brother would have still been alive.

Both of them confront Jesus with this fact, they confess it to him as a statement of their faith – because they knew it was true, if Jesus had come sooner he would have healed Lazarus as they had seen him heal so many others.

But Jesus didn't. And friends we must also face this fact when death takes someone whom we love.

Jesus could have healed them, he could have protected them, he could have spared them as we've seen him do to others... but he didn't.

So how do we respond to that choice which Jesus has made? Some of the Jews see it as a reason to doubt Jesus – they mutter among themselves “he could open the eyes of a blind man, what's wrong couldn't he keep this man from dying?”

Because of their sinful nature they saw Jesus' decision not to heal Lazarus as a sign of impotence, that Jesus had delayed coming to see Lazarus so that he could avoid trying to heal him and failing because he couldn't.

They only saw Jesus as a sideshow miracle worker – not the Messiah. Their sinful nature prevented them from responding in faith to Jesus and his decision to allow Lazarus to die.

But Mary and Martha had faith, and I want to suggest that they are examples of how we can respond in faith and stay loyal to Jesus when He chooses to allow death to take someone we love.

Mary simply breaks down and weeps uncontrollably. When she confronts Jesus with the fact perhaps she was hoping for some sort of words of comfort, some reasoning, some reassurance. But Jesus doesn't respond, he stays quiet and she realizes that Jesus has chosen to allow Lazarus to die.

So Mary weeps, she lets go and gives full vent to the sorrow and sadness and the grief she is feeling in the face of her loss and in the face of Jesus' decision to allow it – but she does this in faith and so Jesus is moved by it, he responds and asks them to take him to the tomb.

Jesus will go with Mary and face that which has devastated her – she will not face it alone. In her brokenheartedness she will discover Jesus standing beside her.

So friends it is possible for us to give full vent to the sorrow and sadness and grief that we feel when we lose a loved one and still remain loyal to Jesus – expressing our sorrow, our grief, our devastation over a decision that Jesus has made does not make us unfaithful and it doesn't drive him away.

If we must weep and be devastated, let us weep and be devastated in the presence of the Lord – for he draws close to the brokenhearted. Friends in your grief you will find Jesus next to you.

Now Martha took a different approach. Martha wasn't the emotional type like her sister Mary. She was rational and practical and she deals with her grief over Jesus' decision by speaking truth.

She confesses that Jesus could have healed her brother if he had come earlier, but the fact that he didn't hasn't shaken her belief in the truth of who He was. She says *“But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask”*

In other words she knew Jesus had come to deliver Israel. She knew God would work to accomplish this through Jesus even though her brother had died because Jesus had come too late – in fact she knew that one day He would rise again at the resurrection and she says this to Jesus.

And these aren't empty words for Martha – they articulate her faith and so Jesus responds. He says *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”* (John 11:25-26)

In other words he is saying to Martha that through this experience you will come to a deeper understanding of who I really am and the truth you believe.

And this is true for us as well.

I know that I'm a lot like Martha – and that when I have to face loss and grief I work through it by confessing what I know to be true about the world we live in, how sin affects it, and how God has acted in Christ to bring salvation from that and how

that is evidence that there will be a new heavens and a new earth someday – and the experience of loss and grief brings me to a deeper place in my relationship with Christ.

And this is helpful for us to know friends as we make space for people to grieve among us, because some of us are like Martha, and some of us are like Mary.

I'll tell you that I was convicted as I studied and prepared this sermon because as someone who is like Martha I keep trying to help my wife – who is like Mary – process loss and grief by telling her how she ought to think and it doesn't help her.

Instead – in opposition to what comes naturally for me – I ought to encourage her to feel, feel all the devastation and grief she is feeling, and to do so in the presence of Jesus because in doing so she will encounter Jesus' compassion and his presence.

And visa-versa it doesn't help the Martha's among us when the Mary's insist we're not getting in touch with our feelings, that we are repressing them and that we need to express our

emotions in the same way they do – we're not repressing, we're confessing – that's how they come out for us.

Friends both responses can be made in faith and Jesus responds to both because of that faith.

Both Martha and Mary are lead to the tomb by Jesus and they both witness His power as He raises their brother back to life!

Martha comes to understand what Jesus' words will truly mean – that believing in Jesus has the power to overcome death – literally!

And Mary experiences that that going through this devastating emotional experience in Jesus' presence is actually the path to new life.

Friends – this morning I want to invite us to celebrate the Lord's Supper as our response to what the Holy Spirit wants to do in us.

Remember two weeks ago we talked about creating time where we expect the Holy Spirit to work in us as we worship and transform us? I was serious about that.

So this morning we want to expect that in the Lord's Supper the Holy Spirit will do what He wants in us...

Maybe help us deal with the grief that we may be experiencing from dealing with death to help us grow to a deeper understanding of the truth, or to reassure us that Jesus is with us and that we will come out on the other side of our devastation with new life.

Let's pray.